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Food & Drink

The Boar War

Did Driskill Grill's David Bull and crew best Bobby Flay on 'Iron Chef America'? Tune in Sunday

By **Kitty Crider**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN FOOD EDITOR

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Last January, Austin chef David Bull rode into New York City without swagger or boots to take on Bobby Flay, one of the Food Network's "Iron Chef" superstars. Bull, the 31-year-old upstart, had his two sidekicks (an über-tight team of assistant chefs), plenty of confidence and three half-gallon bags of wild boar stock.

In the kitchen stadium of "Iron Chef America," Bull and Flay battled with knives, saucepans and pressure cookers for an hour. Cooking on fast-forward speed, they each had 60 minutes to prepare five different plates featuring a secret ingredient. Sunday night the outcome of this battle, taped eight months ago, will be shown on the Food Network and Austin will learn if Bull, the executive chef for the Driskill Hotel, whipped up on Flay. Or did the "Iron Chef" regular, the founder of Mesa Grill and star of multiple food television shows, prevail over the challenger?



Matt Rourke
AMERICAN-STATESMAN

(enlarge photo)

The Driskill Grill's David Bull, left, Jason Maddy and Josh Watkins tested their wild boar menu — and their timing — late last year.



Matt Rourke
AMERICAN-STATESMAN

(enlarge photo)

Josh Watkins, David Bull and Jason Maddy have been keeping mum on the results of the show since January.



For Bull, the show has been a year in the making. Last fall, he applied to challenge an "Iron Chef" champ on the Food Network, sending his résumé, video, menus and accolades. His credits include having been the youngest sous chef ever at Dallas' Mansion on Turtle Creek and one of the top 10 chefs of 2003 selected by Food & Wine magazine. "Iron Chef America" bit, and shortly after 2006 began, he found himself in the network kitchen in Greenwich Village. It was time to execute one of the menus he had practiced.

In an action-packed competition, Bull and his two Driskill chefs prepared 30 to 35 different components — black truffle grits, pistachio-crusted boar chops, grilled watermelon, sautéed apples in whiskey — for the five plates to be tasted by three judges.

"We never looked over in (Flay's) direction during the challenge," Bull says. "Even during the fire."

Fire?

Indeed, in what appeared to be a slight mishap, Flay's team shot flames a couple of feet high in the air while cooking a rack of ribs in a roaster, prompting commentator Alton Brown to quip about his cooking "flair." Flay, a restaurant veteran of 23 years, and his two chefs hustled, too, blending sweet potatoes and polenta, poaching pork loins in duck fat, slathering ribs with pomegranate molasses.

As Bull and his team competed in the unfamiliar but well-equipped kitchen, they dodged lighting and camera crew members, even throwing a few elbows. But that is all part of the show. And with smoke and lights and fire, "Iron Chef America" is definitely show biz.

For the Driskill team, however, it was not so different from a typical full-house Saturday night in a five-star kitchen. More mental, less physical.

"This was physical for 60 minutes, but eight hours mental," said Josh Watkins, 28, Driskill chef de cuisine. "It was the most interesting and exciting (cooking experience). So much fun."

It was even more mental than that, countered Bull, figuring in all the planning. "But it was cool as paintball," sous chef Jason Maddy, 30, added.

Bull, like a good chef or quarterback, had to be flexible and change the plate presentation on the spot because the network's china was different from what he expected. He had to create comment for the sound guy; his team was so in tune, they talked little. He even modified one of the game plays, deciding to smoke an ingredient before further cooking it.

The competition centered around a single ingredient that was revealed to the chefs with smoke and fanfare about an hour and a half before the cooking began, he said. It had to be prepared five ways.

Months before, Bull and Flay had been told that it would be one of three ingredients: caviar, peppers or wild boar. Bull and his two sous chefs planned and practiced menus for each.

In December, in the midst of holiday activities, Bull, Watkins and Maddy grabbed an hour for a

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Wild boar with risotto was one dish created for the competition.

'Iron Chef America'

- David Bull vs. Bobby Flay
- 8 p.m. Sunday
- Food Network

second practice of wild boar. With the clock running, they butchered a boar carcass, slammed a pan bottom on black peppercorns to crack them, peeled cipollini onions, burned pistachios, tossed them out and retoasted more, diced apples, sliced truffles. They were cranking, sweat pouring down their faces as heat filled the Driskill's fine-dining kitchen. Five pots were on one stove, containing pork belly, risotto, broth, butter, wild boar glaze.

"Time?" called Bull.

"Twenty-nine minutes," Watkins replied.

"Get me a blow torch," said Bull, wanting to soften Pont-l'Évêque cheese.

At 12 minutes left, he had two plates finished, a third partially done and the others coming. On the counter was a diagram for arranging each of the dishes.

He plated and painted and garnished.

With 1 1/2 minutes left, they were done. They high-fived and then tasted and critiqued the practice session. Just in case it should turn out to be the ingredient.

The challenge of cooking the wild boar is using a variety of its cuts and getting the meat tender in less than an hour. Stock, which takes hours to make, is the only ingredient chefs are allowed to bring with them to the Iron Chef competition, Bull said.

In a previous practice session, "the shoulder and belly weren't tender, so we bought a pressure cooker," Bull said.

He practiced menus for the other ingredients as well, and when he arrived in New York for the show's taping, he felt he was ready. He slept soundly the night before, in fact the first real night's sleep since the birth of his daughter three weeks earlier.

Still, there was some antsy downtime. Waiting to cook was the hardest part, Bull said. So he and his chefs went shopping for Japanese knives at Korin. They lunched at a Belgian waffle place. They read cookbooks in the Food Network's library.

Before the actual clock-ticking competition, the network taped interviews with the contestants. They filmed — four takes — the revelation of the secret ingredient: hunks of wild boar on a pedestal in a swirl of smoke. The Texans were pumped. It was their favorite ingredient and they had practiced it twice.

Finally, the cooking hour arrived. Bull, a father of four, placed his new baby girl's photo on his station in the "Iron Chef" kitchen as his good luck charm.

In the audience, the Texas team had a large cheering section, including Driskill colleagues, some loyal diners and Bull and Watkins' moms, who were tearfully nervous.

The chefs cooked with intensity, answering the play-by-play announcers' questions. They improvised. When the convection oven door would not stay closed, they braced it with a mortar and pestle, but it had to be moved every time they used the oven. When they finished the challenge — five minutes before the buzzer, as they had planned — they toasted each other with Shiner Bocks.

"We felt like we had done everything the best we could," Maddy said. "No mistakes."

But what did the judges think?

Each team's wild boar menu was judged by three people: actress Cady Huffman; Chris Cognac, a policeman and food writer launching his own show, "The Hungry Detective," this month; and Jeffrey Steingarten, food writer for Vogue and Slate and author of "The Man Who Ate Everything." With a scorecard based on taste (10 points), originality (5 points) and presentation (5 points), they critiqued the contenders' five plates in front of Bull and Flay. They each got hits and misses.

Who won?

Bull isn't talking until Sunday night, when he views the show with friends for the first time. Something about a confidentiality agreement.

Seven hours after Bull and his sidekicks entered the competition studio, they finished and went to Masa restaurant for dinner, daringly eating blowfish five ways. Then the fearless young kitchen Turks took their knives and headed back to Texas.

"We would do it again tomorrow if we could," Bull says.

David Bull's wild boar menu

- Wild Boar Carpaccio with Grilled Watermelon, Pistachios, Minus 8 Vinegar
- Wild Boar 'Bacon' with Garlic Risotto, Chive Emulsion, Caraway Molasses Glaze
- Rack of Wild Boar with Whiskey Apples, Pont-l'Évêque, Cipollini Onions
- Roasted Boar Loin with Black Truffle Grits, Braised Fennel, Sage Brown Butter
- Wild Boar Texas Pot Roast with Corn Whipped Potatoes, Coriander Salad, Tobacco Onions

Bobby Flay's wild boar menu

- Wild Boar Skewers with Hoisin Pineapple Glaze
- Wild Boar Milanese Style
- Rack of Wild Boar with Mustard and Bourbon Glaze
- Molasses Braised Wild Boar with Sweet Potato Polenta
- Wild Boar Two Ways: Poached in Duck Fat and Back Ribs with Pomegranate Glaze

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